

Report Summary

What Is P-16 Education? – A Primer for Legislators¹

Introduction to the Report

What Is P-16 Education? has its origin in a 1998 initiative of the National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL) to make legislative connections between K-16 and higher education policy. NCSL collaborated on this issue with the Education Commission of the States (ECS), the Consortium for Policy Research in Education (CPRE), and the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL). ECS prepared *What Is P-16 Education?* as a practical guide for policymakers interested in promoting a seamless system of public education for every child that “integrates a student’s education beginning in preschool (as early as 3 years old) and ends with a four-year college degree.”

The authors relate the need for state policymakers to think in terms of a P-16 system (in which curriculum and processes build smoothly from preschool through a baccalaureate degree) to fundamental changes in America’s population and to higher educational expectations of civic duty and of the workplace. America’s school-age population, now 35% nonwhite, will be 51% nonwhite by 2040, with many states having nonwhite majorities long before 2040. Also by 2040, the Latino portion of the school-age population will grow from its present 15% to 28%. Increasingly complex issues related to living in a democracy demand that all of these students be able to think critically about national, state, and community problems and be prepared to engage in their resolution. Jobs requiring some postsecondary education are growing rapidly; 80% of students graduating from high school in the next decade will go on to postsecondary education. The authors also argue that P-16 systems will address important issues associated with the present fragmented education systems (which they call “nonsystems”).

- With 65% of mothers now in the labor force, preschool is needed to serve young children. The payoff will be lower rates of grade retention, fewer special education placements, higher rates of high school graduation and postsecondary enrollment, higher employment rates, and reduced social problems.
- College admission standards need to be simplified. Enrollment rates are expected to rise almost 20% by 2015, with participation by minorities and people aged 35 and older increasing dramatically. Present admissions procedures employ a vast number of placement exams unrelated to high school standards.
- Remedial coursework in postsecondary institutions adds to the cost of the system and delays students’ progress toward graduation. Colleges should not be offering any remedial courses, yet 29% of students enrolling as freshman in 1995 took at least one remedial course in reading, writing, or mathematics.

The authors further support their call for policymakers to initiate P-16 systems with a quote from *The Learning Connection: New Partnerships Between Schools and Colleges* (Teachers College Press, 2001).

The chasm between schools and colleges is an indication of dysfunction, a phenomenon that is increasingly recognized as a major impediment to the successful education of all students. High standards and improved schools and colleges will, we strongly suggest, ultimately depend on the extent to which this gap can be narrowed. (Page 4 of *What...?*)

Fragmented state policy structures are a barrier to the development of a coherent system of education that unites early (preschool) learning, K-12 education, and postsecondary education.

Legislatures frequently assign early learning, K-12, and postsecondary decisions to separate committees or consider these issues in separate bills. One challenge of a P-16 approach is to align legislative structures and processes to accommodate a cross-system perspective. (Page 6 of *What...?*)

Assumptions underlying development of a P-16 system to bridge the chasm between schools and colleges are:

1. every child can learn and, hence, deserves an equal opportunity to develop his/her abilities;
2. early childhood education will pay dividends to both individuals and society;
3. educators at each level of P-16 should interact with colleagues at the next higher and next lower level;
4. P-16 system development, and reporting of progress, should engage the broad education community – legislators, business leaders, educators, students, and the public;
5. the education system should match the unique context of the state and the diversity of its students; and
6. the education system should be a work in progress, continuously adapting to social, technological, and economic changes.

Findings and Recommendations

The report suggests two basic approaches to building a P-16 system. One is to choose an initial “point of entry” issue (e.g., teaching preparation and professional development) as a focus for work across the P-16 system. The second is to design an omnibus bill aimed at achieving multiple goals simultaneously at each of the three levels of the P-16 system. The agenda for change under either strategy should highlight areas of mutual interest between each of three pairings of education levels: Early Learning/K-12; Early Learning/Postsecondary; and K-12/Postsecondary. Specific points of mutual interest suggested for the K-12/Postsecondary pairing are:

- aligning exams used for high school graduation, college entrance, and postsecondary course placement;
- phasing out remedial education courses at four-year colleges;
- dropping the “general track” from secondary schools, and providing all students with the skills required to succeed in postsecondary institutions;
- broadening the curriculum options of grades 11-14 to include employment internships/apprenticeships, certificate programs, and early postsecondary enrollment; and
- sharing data on students’ college performance with the high schools from which the students graduated and/or with the two-year postsecondary institutions from which they transferred.

The report also suggests five steps for legislators to use in starting or furthering P-16 system development. The first two steps engage only legislators and educators. Steps 3-5 broaden the effort to include business leaders, community leaders, and the general public.

1. *Bring key education leaders together, define problem and create a vision.* The principal task is to get legislators and educators to think of P-16 as one system rather than several.
2. *Outline possible policy options.* A formal examination of existing policies to identify strengths, weakness, and inconsistencies can be used as the basis for next steps. Next steps could include eliminating some current policies, modifying others, and introducing new policies consistent with a P-16 agenda.
3. *Build consensus for a P-16 system.* There must be broad public consensus before solutions are offered for legislative action. Support of a P-16 system will need to be sustained even if consensus is slow to build. Solutions should be allowed to emerge.
4. *Suggest solutions.* There should be incentives for the three levels of the current system to work together. It may be necessary to create “an overarching governance structure” for preschool through postsecondary education.
5. *Continue consensus building.* Consensus building must continue as solutions are implemented, assessed, and revised.

The report notes that half the states have begun the complex work of building P-16 systems. P-16 initiatives of four states – Georgia, Maryland, Missouri, Oregon – are described briefly. Based upon the experiences of states that are moving toward P-16 systems, ECS presents policymakers with the “Top 10 Policy Questions Every Legislator Should Ask About P-16 Education,” lists websites and publications which it judges the best available sources on P-16 issues, and provides a starter glossary of 30 terms associated with the literature of P-16 initiatives. [NOTE: Terms in the glossary are defined as they apply to their use in discussing state work on P-16 and related education systems. Some of those terms – e.g., *accountability*, *alignment*, and *teacher quality* – have different definitions in the context of other aspects of education reform.]

About the Publisher

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) is a nonprofit, nationwide interstate organization that helps governors, legislators, state education officials and others identify, develop and implement public policies to improve student learning at all levels. ECS is chaired by a different governor each year, alternating parties. The ECS office is located at 700 Broadway, Suite 1200, Denver, CO 80203-3460. TEL: 303-299-3600. FAX: 303-296-8332. WEBSITE: <http://www.ecs.org>

Caveat Emptor

This summary was prepared by Bob Kansky (robk@tribcsp.com). It's one of a series summaries offered to business, education, and policy leaders who are interested in the systemic improvement of mathematics and science education. The summary does not critique the report's assumptions, methods, or conclusions. It simply uses a somewhat standardized format to provide a brief introduction to the content of the report. Readers are encouraged to consult the original document for further information.

¹Van de Water, Gordon, and Rainwater, Terese. (2000). *What Is P-16 Education? – A Primer for Legislators*. Denver, CO: Education Commission of the States. 26 pages. The report is available from the ECS Distribution Center. Call 303-299-3692 and request publication P16-01-01. More information on the subject can be found at the P-16 issue page of the ECS website: <http://www.ecs.org/html/issue.asp?issueid=76>